Chapter XY

The Internet and Sexual Offending: An International Perspective

by

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Summary

Although the sexual abuse of children is a long-standing problem that has received considerable scholarly attention, still little is understood about sex offenses that occur by means of, or are facilitated through, the Internet. Increasing awareness of the Internet as a platform for the perpetration of sexual crimes has raised new questions on this aspect of criminal behavior. Of interest, for example, is whether those who engage in Internet-related sex crimes are a distinct type of sexual offender, or whether these offenders "merely" use newer technological methods to facilitate or perpetrate offenses. Moreover, little is known about the patterns, motivations, or typological similarities among types of individuals who use the Internet to commit sexual crimes. Of further concern is the risk posed by this class of sexual offenders, particularly the extent or rate at which those with an Internet-based conviction will escalate to (or have already engaged in) other types of sexual offences, especially "hands on" or contact sexual offenses. In reviewing the current empirical literature and drawing attention to areas of research need, this chapter addresses these and other pertinent questions related to use of the Internet in the commission of sexual offenses This chapter also draws focus to the importance of international cooperation, including policing, industry, (e.g., Internet Service Providers [ISPs], finance companies), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in the control and persecution of these offenses. Given the still limited empirical knowledge in this area, coupled with the inherently global nature of the Internet and the pace of technological advancement, the prosecution of Internet-based sexual crimes poses unique challenges that require thoughtful and rigorous scholarly attention.

Introduction

While traditional categorizations of sex crimes have typically been made with reference to the age of the victim (e.g., child molestation versus rape) or the nature of the offense (e.g., voyeurism versus exhibitionism), in the past decade a new category of sex crimes has emerged that is defined mostly with reference to the medium through which the sex crime initiates or takes place, to wit, Internet-based sexual offenses. Labels such as *Internet sex offender* (Elliot, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Robilotta, Mercado, & DeGue, 2008) and *cybersex offender*, (Bowker & Gray, 2004) have been applied to individuals who use the Internet in some manner to facilitate a contact sexual offense, view child pornography online, or otherwise engage in an inappropriate sexual activity or chat through the Internet. While conventional notions of child molestation are often thought to include at least the presence of the offender in close proximity to a victim, if not an actual contact assault, Internet sex crimes may occur, and may occur more typically, without physical contact. For example, an offender may view and share child pornography online or may engage in inappropriate sexual chat with a minor, and these activities may or may not be geared toward the facilitation of a contact sexual encounter.

Taylor and Quayle (2003) note that the problem of Internet child pornography has been given "massive media and political attention, becoming a "major area of law enforcement activity" (p. 1). Increasing technological advancement has not only broadened access to pornographic material, but new software capabilities also allow for a more effortless creation of pornographic matter while enhanced encryption and other technologies offer new ways for distributors of this material to evade prosecution. According to Van Ngoc and Seikowski (2005), approximately 90% of all child pornography is now distributed online, with a shift from professionally produced material to more and more dilettantish, "self-made" images and videos.

Klain, Davies & Hicks (2001) note how increased access to sophisticated computer technology has "revolutionized child pornography by increasing the ease and decreasing the cost of production and distribution, especially across international borders" (p. 9).

There has been a steady rise in both the number of newly developed sexually abusive images of children that are confiscated from the Internet (Quayle, Vaughan, & Taylor, 2006) and the number of online ads for child pornography (Klain et al., 2001). Between 1996 and 2006, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Cyber Division noted a 1789% increase in cases opened and a 1397% rise in convictions and pre-trial diversions for online child pornography and online child sexual exploitation offenses (FBI, 2006). England and Wales recorded 549 convictions of child pornography in 2001 and a markedly larger 2234 convictions in 2003 (Laulik, Allam, & Sheridan, 2007), representing an over 300% increase in child pornography convictions during this two-year period. Similarly, in the United States, the CyberTipline, operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), had received more than 24,400 reports of child pornography by 2001. By the start of 2006, however, that number had soared to more than 340,000 (http://www.missingkids.com/ missingkids/servlet/NewsEventServlet?LanguageCountry =en_US&PageId=2629). As courts, prisons, and probation services consequently have to deal with an increasing number of individuals who have committed or been alleged to have committed Internet-related sex crimes, many questions have arisen with regard to the assessment, treatment, management, and risk of this population (Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007). It is still unclear whether the Internet is simply a new communication tool for the same erstwhile class of offenders or whether it has given rise to a newly evolved and discrete form of offending behaviour, one that might have unique etiological determinants and require distinct forms of intervention and management. This chapter

will present the current "state of the art" with regard to what is known about the emerging and heterogeneous group of individuals who perpetrate Internet-related sex crimes.

Problematic Use of the Internet

Although terms like 'internet addiction' have been used to describe excessive Internet use (Warden, Phillips, & Ogloff, 2004), some consider online sexual offenses part of a more general problematic use of the Internet (see e.g., Van Ngoc & Seikowski, 2005). Davis (2001) distinguishes *general* Pathological Internet Use (PIU), which may include more "general, multidimensional overuse of the Internet," from *specific* PIU, which may involve problematic overuse of the Internet for a specific purpose, such as gambling, gaming, or online sex. Davis (2001) suggests that specific PIU is generally the result of an antecedent psychopathology that becomes linked with the Internet use, suggesting that this is likely a new form of a pre-existing problematic or deviant behavior. Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Ybarra (2008), based on their findings from a series of national studies examining the characteristics and prevalence of these Internet-related offenses, concur that, "Although a new medium for communication is involved, the nonforcible sex crimes that predominate as offenses against youths online are not particularly new or uncommon." (p. 113).

In an effort to address whether the Internet itself might cultivate problematic or illegal behaviour, Demetriou and Silke (2003), who examined the online behavior of Internet users through a website aimed at tracking web surfing patterns, found that "at least 56 per cent [*sic*] of visitors who came to the site for legal and legitimate purposes, ended up accessing illegal or pornographic material" (p. 219). Demetriou and Silke (2003) suggested that the deindividuating and anonymous nature of the Internet may facilitate deviant behaviour, which stands in some contrast to the suggestion of an antecedent deviancy. Similarly, Taylor and Quayle (2003)

suggest that certain features of Internet communication, such as the ability to assume a new identity or develop social relationships that normalize deviant behaviour, ease the entrée into the commission of Internet-related sexual offenses. Although research in this area is still in its infancy, further studies might examine whether the nature of the Internet itself, as distinct from the "real world," may in some way nourish sexual deviancy, or alternatively, if this is "merely" a new means of satisfying pre-existing sexually deviant urges.

Internet Sexual Offenses

Some researchers have attempted to construct taxonomies of Internet sex offending (for example, see Bowker & Gray, 2004; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). Overall, sex offenders appear to use the Internet for three primary, and at times overlapping, purposes: (a) the distribution, production, or viewing of child pornography, (b) the identification and grooming of potential victims, and (c) the creation of networks among perpetrators of child sexual abusers, among others. These purposes are not mutually exclusive, however, nor is the universe of Internet-related sexually deviant behaviour limited to these categories[1].

Distribution, Production, or Viewing of Child Pornography: Though Internet-derived child pornography has probably received more research and policy attention than have other types of cybersex crimes, the development of objective, unambiguous standards for what constitutes child pornography has been difficult given the inherent subjectivity in determining whether matter is, for example, "patently offensive," "harmful to children," or appeals to

[1] Wortley and Smallbone, for example, include other forms of Internet facilitated perpetration and, moreover, some categorize those who use the Internet to facilitate sex offending in alternative manners (e.g., Alexy, Burgess, & Baker, 2006; McLaughlin, 2000). Although these categorical classification schemes may vary, the current description provides a summary of common categorizations.

"prurient interest" (Cohen, 2002, p. 8). While Taylor, Holland and Quayle (2001) attempted to define content categories of child pornography, they emphasize, perhaps most importantly, that the mind of the viewer often defines the pornographic feature of the material rather than the objective nature of the content itself.

Furthermore, though a distinction must be made between producers and viewers of pornographic material, these groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Child pornography may be produced in a detached, professional context with the primary motive being that of financial profit. Indeed, most photographs and videos stem from commercial rings whose goal is that of economic gain (Hesselbart & Haag, 2004). That said, technological advances now enable the wider public to produce and distribute pornographic material with relative ease. Indeed, some offenders may find the process of generating such explicit images to be arousing in itself (Taylor & Quayle, 2003). Importantly, Calcetas-Santos (2001a) and Taylor and Quayle (2003) stress that both viewers and producers of this material inherently accept that a child was abused in the production of the pornography and, moreover, understand that this material may facilitate sexually offensive behaviour.

While pornographic material is typically created with actual victims, pseudo-images (or morphed digital constructions) that may not employ an actual victim or, alternatively, may employ only fractions of one or several victims, must also be considered. Notably, these morphed constructions may create prosecution issues in some jurisdictions as legislation was, at least historically, often based on there being an identifiable victim. Notably, however, legislation has become more expansive in some jurisdictions so as to allow prosecution even where there is no identifiable victim.

Sullivan and Beech (2004) differentiate between three types of child pornography users, including (1) those who collect out of a general sexual preference for children, (2) those who nurture a developing interest in children, and (3) those who view primarily to satisfy a curiosity. Krone's (2004) typology of pornography users similarly distinguishes among those who unintentionally come across, but knowingly choose to keep, child pornography and those who actively search for child pornography on the Internet. Pornographic material has also been noted to be used by sex tourists who choose future victims by viewing them in advance or, alternatively, by sex tourists who digitally record and later distribute images of their abusive acts (Hesselbarth & Haag, 2004; Junkermann, 2006), rendering them "producers" or "distributors" of this material (Krone, 2004).

The identification and grooming of potential victims: The Internet may allow an offender to gather information about potential victims and engage in conversations, which may facilitate trust and desensitize a minor to sexual chat (McGrath & Casey, 2002; McLaughlin; 2000). Frequent online meetings may be used to groom victims, especially through successive sexual explicitness (verbally or by transferring pornographic material), and may in some cases be used to facilitate progression to "real world" activities, which could lead to offline meetings. Notably, an offender can use the Internet to groom several victims simultaneously, while this sort of grooming may be more difficult were physical proximity required (Bowker & Gay, 2004).

Creation of networks among perpetrators of child sexual abuse: Wortley and Smallbone (2006) report that the Internet "facilitates a subculture of pedophiles" (p. 21) who may share and exchange pornographic materials. Typically, these images or videos cannot be located via search engines but can be found through server channels whereby illicit materials are passed between interested users (Junkermann, 2006). Abuse may also be broadcast via real-time streaming video,

with viewers invited to suggest sexual activities to be done to the victim (Hesselbarth & Haag, 2004). Indeed, this 'shared' viewing of the sexual abuse of a child, where some may be directly involved while others watch or dictate the activity, may imply social acceptance and serve to normalize such activities. In addition to the exchange of pornographic material, online communities enable their members to openly discuss their deviant sexual interests, talk about victim grooming strategies, and strategize to overcome safety technologies (Mahoney, 2001; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). Malesky and Ennis (2004), in an observational examination of posts on a "pro-pedophile" online message board, found that more than one fifth (21%) of the postings examined were considered to be a "validation of pedophilic ideologies" (p. 95).Even though users may already have many of the "attitudes and ethics of the communities" (Beech, Elliot, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008, p. 221), online communities may indeed validate sexually deviant beliefs serving to facilitate social communication among formerly isolated groups of offenders (Quayle & Taylor, 2002a).

Law Enforcement Response and Policing Issues

Given the global nature of the Internet, these sorts of sex crimes present unique jurisdictional, policing, and regulatory concerns. The investigation and prosecution of Internet-related sex crimes often requires the cooperation of both national and international law enforcement jurisdictions (Wells, Finkelhor, Wolak, & Mitchell, 2007). This need for global cooperation is further complicated by the fact that criteria for defining categories of sexual offenses can vary considerably across jurisdictions, at both international and intra-national levels. For example, a child under the age of 14 is considered a minor in Germany, while Australia, the United Kingdom, and Sweden consider youth under the age of 15 to be minors, Belgium considers youth under 18 to be of minor status (Burke, Sowerbutts, Blundell, and

Sherry, 2002), and age of consent laws in the United States are made predominantly at the state level. Moreover, there is no uniform policy across nations for addressing the production, distribution, or possession of pornographic material (Klain, Davies, & Hicks, 2001). As such, countries perceived to have weak or lax enforcement of child pornography laws often become "source countries" for this material (Klain et al., 2001, p. 34). Furthermore, efforts to intervene against Internet sexual offending are often hampered by insufficient technical resources or knowledge necessary to overcome the complex, multidirectional flow of information on the Internet (Gallwitz & Paulus, 2001; Van Ngoc & Seikowski, 2005). Some offenders may employ specialized techniques to evade detection (e.g., file encryption) or prosecution (e.g., use of morphed images of children), creating additional complications. Indeed, laws pertaining to sex crimes must keep pace with ever-advancing technological change.

As would be expected, nations vary with regard to the resource availability technical sophistication necessary to effectively police and investigate Internet-related sex crimes. During the past decade or so, most countries have set up special police or investigatory units (e.g., the FBI's Innocent Images team) to combat online offenses. However, the constant advancement of technology requires considerable financial resources and increasingly qualified investigators to maintain these sophisticated technological operations; resources that may be more limited in economically or technologically disadvantaged countries.

As noted, the global nature of the Internet magnifies the aforementioned difficulties in policing and prosecuting online offenses, underscoring the need for international alliance. This can be complicated, however, given that international regulation implies mutual agreement regarding cultural and moral standards, such as age of consent or an understanding of what constitutes pornography. For example, Germany has stricter limitations on what is labelled "hard

core pornography" than do most Scandinavian countries (Calcetas-Santos, 2001b). Despite challenges, some successful strategic alliances have been formed, including the early International Communication Charter of 1999, which was released to structure international online cooperation within the EU (White, 2001). The International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) convened an inaugural U.S./European summit in 2005, which ended with a plan to eradicate commercial child pornography worldwide (http://www.icmec.org/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry= en_X1&PageId =1742). Interpol, the international policing agency, has a standing unit for child pornography offenses (Fournier de Saint Maur, 2001). These well-developed international coalitions tend to be concentrated in the Western World, however, while often the countries most affected (such as Asia, Middle and South America, Africa, or the former Eastern bloc) have less-established functioning police collaborations (Gallwitz & Paulus, 2001).

The technology industry has also launched collaborative efforts to combat the problem of Internet sexual offending. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has introduced the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS), which enables descriptive labels to be associated with Internet content. Moreover, the Recreational Software Advisory Council on the Internet (RCACi) measures web content with regard to its violence, nudity, sexual explicitness, and vulgarity (Aftab, 2001). Aftab also describes how some especially filtered search engines (e.g., Yahooligans!) scan for child-appropriate material only. A combined coalition of Internet Service Providers [ISPs] and banking sectors (e.g., American Express, Chase, CitiGroup, and Visa) joined with NCMEC and ICMEC to develop technological and financial solutions to combat the exploitation of children and trafficking of online pornography (http:// www.missingkids.com missingkids/servlet/NewsEventServlet?LanguageCountry =en_US&PageId=2629). Furthermore,

the Internet Watch Foundation, a European union of Internet industries, aims to limit offensive content on the Internet (Kerr, 2001). Other non-governmental attempts at control, including international communities like ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes), have also started to extend their influence (O'Brian, 2001).

Although coalitions of Internet industry giants, banking organizations, not-for-profit entities, and national and international police organizations have formed, their collaborative efforts must keep pace with, if not surpass, those of the individuals or organized groups who profit from child pornography and engage in cybersex offenses. Attention must also be paid to questions such as who should be regulating the Internet - government, the industry itself, or collaborative unions (Chan, 2006). In addition, policymakers must wrestle with how best to balance freedom of speech and censorship concerns (Calcetas-Santos, 2001b; Chan, 2006), as the privilege of free expression must be weighed against the desire to protect youth by regulating Internet content. Again, however, the global nature of the Internet brings difficulty as nations undoubtedly vary with regard to judgments about how best to achieve this balance.

Offense Patterns and Offender Characteristics

Despite increased attention within the policing community as to the detection and prosecution of these crimes, still relatively little empirical research has examined the characteristics and offense patterns of those who engage in Internet related sexual offenses. As noted above, little is known with regard to the extent to which these offenders differ from other sex offenders (beyond their use of technology in initiating or committing offenses). Expanded knowledge of how Internet sex offenders (and the varied subtypes within this categorization)

differ from non-Internet offenders, if they do at all, would assist in the evaluation, treatment, and assessment of risk with this population.

Offender demographics. Wolak, Finkelhor and Mitchell (2004) found that offenders who initiated sex crimes through Internet encounters were predominantly older than conventional sexual offenders though; in contrast, Elliot and colleagues (2009) found that Internet sex offenders tended to be younger than contact offenders. Burke and colleagues (2002) observed that offenders in South Australia who had accessed child pornography through the Internet tended to be more educated and more likely to be employed than contact offenders, and further found that contact sex offenders were more likely to be in a relationship than were their non-contact offender counterparts. These results seem confirmed by the empirical findings of Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2005) who, in examining offenders who used the Internet in offenses against acquaintances or family members (which constitute an estimated 18% of all arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors), found that 87% of the acquaintance offenders examined were 26 years of age or older, 78% were employed full-time, 41% were married or living with a partner, and 35% had at least some college education. In summary, research to date suggests that those who perpetrate Internet-based offenses are more likely to be employed and educated than those who do not perpetrate Internet-based offenses, though these findings may in part reflect that education and wealth are likely to be linked to computer access and know-how. Also, although a sizeable percentage (18%) of cybersex crime arrests involve family members or acquaintances, this percentage appears considerably lower than that of non-Internet offenders, of whom the majority are acquainted with their victims (Simon, 2003)

Offense and Victim Characteristics. Wolak et al. (2004) found that the offenders in their sample were typically *not* pedophiles, i.e., attracted to prepubescent children. Rather, victims

tended to be teenage children between the age of 13 and 17 (99%), most of whom were female (75%). The majority (76%) of initial encounters in Wolak et al.'s (2004) sample took place in an Internet chat room, and extensive grooming was common, with nearly two-thirds (64%) of the offenders communicating online with the victim for more than a month. While Malesky (2007) found that nearly a third (29%) of the 31 convicted adult offenders had misrepresented themselves as youth during a sex crime initiated over the Internet, Wolak et al. (2004) found that only 5% of their larger sample had misrepresented themselves as age 17 or below. Still, though misrepresenting oneself as a peer of the victim was uncommon, a quarter of Wolak et al.'s sample was noted to have presented themselves as slightly younger than their true age. Nevertheless, most were forthcoming about their sexual motives and interest and, notably, many of the victims viewed their interactions with the offenders as "desired relationships" (Wolak et al., 2004). Noteworthy, Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2003) reported that adolescent youth who experience emotional or social difficulties (such as depression or peer victimization) or troubled relationships with caregivers may be more likely to not only form online relationships, but also place themselves at risk for online exploitation. In sum, the data available suggest that those who engage in Internet based sex crimes may misrepresent their true age or deceive potential victims at a lower frequency than might be expected, while their victims, who tend to be post-pubescent adolescents with increased rates of emotional or social maladjustment, may consider these relationships mutually rewarding rather than exploitative.

Criminal History and Risk for Future Offending. An important concern is whether those with detected cybersex offenses have previous contact offenses and/or are at risk to commit future sexual offenses, especially contact offenses. While some evidence suggests that child pornography offending may be a strong indicator of pedophilia (Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard,

2006), still little data offers evidence as to whether the commission of cybersex crimes serves as a gateway to contact offending. Burke et al. (2001) observed, in a non-empirical examination, that offenders in treatment reported behaviors or thoughts consistent with a progression from non-contact Internet activity to hands-on sexual offending. Quayle and Taylor (2002), who conducted semi-structured interviews with men who had been convicted of possessing illegally downloaded images of children, found that although some offenders reported downloading child pornography as a substitute for contact offending, others reported pornography serving more as a "blueprint" to offending. One such offender expressed, for example, "The offenses against [my] victim… I copied what I'd seen on the computer" (pp 339-340).

In one of the few empirical studies to have examined the offending patterns of child pornography offenders, Seto and Eke (2005) found that over half (56%) of the child pornography offenders sampled had previously been charged with a criminal offense of any kind with nearly a quarter of this sample (24%) having a prior sexual offense on record. Bourke and Hernandez (2008) found that 85% of the child pornography offenders in their sample had admitted (post-treatment) to at least one hands-on sexual offense, leaving them to challenge the assertion that this type of offender is "just" involved with images of children. In fact, only 2% of the child pornography offenders who entered treatment were "verified" (through use of the poloygraph) to have been "just pictures" offenders (Bourke & Hernandez, 2008, p. 188). In comparing the offense histories of Internet child pornography offenders with child molesters, Webb and colleagues (2007) found that Internet sex offenders had significantly fewer prior contact and non-contact sex offenses on record than did contact child molesters, and Elliot et al. (2009) similarly found that contact offenders were nearly three times more likely to have a known or otherwise detected previous sexual offense than were Internet offenders.

Regarding the likelihood of future offending, Seto and Eke (2005) found that 17% of the child pornography offenders in their sample re-offended during the follow up period, with 4% of the follow-up group committing a new contact sexual offense. Somewhat inconsistent with these findings, Webb and colleagues (2007) found that *none* of the Internet offenders in their sample committed a follow-up contact sex offense, while 3% were convicted of a later Internet sexual offense. Moreover, contact child molesters in their sample had higher rates of recidivism (including general, violent, or sexual re-offense) than those with an Internet-based sexual offense. In summary, while those with an index contact sexual offense may be more likely than those with an Internet-related or child pornography offense to have a history of contact sexual offenses or commit a contact sexual re-offense, the notion that Internet-based offender "graduate" or escalate to more serious contact offending seems undermined by the fact that many of these offenders already have some sort of contact sexual offense history.

Offender Cognitions. Offenders who use the Internet in the commission of their offense may also be unique from non-Internet offenders with regard to their thought patterns or offense supportive cognitions. Howitt and Sheldon (2007), who compared the cognitive distortions of Internet and contact sexual offenders, found that Internet child pornography offenders were more likely to sexualize children (i.e., consider them as sexual beings) than contact sex offenders, though overall they found few differences between offender groups. Elliot and colleagues (2009), however, found a number of differences between Internet and contact offenders; most notably, contact offenders tended to have more victim empathy and cognitive distortions and to have reported higher levels of emotional congruence with children than did Internet offenders. Elliot et al. (2009) further found increased ability to identify with fictional characters, under-assertiveness, and motor impulsivity to be predictive of Internet (versus contact-based) sex

offenses. Quayle and Taylor (2002) observed that the Internet allows offenders to cognitively distance themselves from their acts, with offenders mislabeling child pornography as "art" or seeming to minimize harm done to victims. Moreover, in an examination of online posts, the most commonly observed offense supportive distortion was the euphemistic labeling of these relationships as egalitarian and romantic in nature (Malesky & Ennis, 2004). In summary, while some evidence suggests that those who commit Internet-based sex crimes may show some distinct offense-supportive beliefs from those of more traditional (i.e., non-Internet) groups of sex offenders, a clear pattern of offender cognitions related to Internet-based offending has yet to emerge.

Offender psychopathology. Although Laulik and colleagues (2007) did not find that Internet sex offenders, as a group, showed elevated levels of psychopathology, affective and interpersonal difficulties were reportedly common. Though employing a small sample size (N = 30), it is notable that half (50%) of those sampled were observed to have impaired interpersonal functioning, suggesting that this group would tend to be under-assertive, self-conscious in social interactions, and generally lacking in social competence. In a larger sample of 72 male sex offenders who had Internet pornography offenses, Middleton et al. (2006) found that intimacy deficits were relatively common. Indeed, when the pathways model of etiology (Ward & Siegert, 2002) was applied to this sample, the majority of these offenders were categorized as under the *Intimacy Deficits* (approximately 21% of entire sample) or *Emotional Dysregulation* (approximately 19% of entire sample) pathways, suggesting that low-self-esteem, self-perceived failure in relationships with adults, and emotional loneliness; or respectively, difficulty managing negative emotional states, may be etiologically connected to offending among those who engage in Internet-related sexual offenses, though the arrest and discovery may affect interpersonal and

emotional functioning. In sum, though more serious forms of psychopathology seem uncommon, problems with intimacy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships do appear to be typical among those who perpetrate Internet-based sex crimes.

As discussed, there may be numerous, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, subtypes of those who commit Internet-based sexual offenses, including those who collect and trade child pornography, those who communicate with minors for the purpose of sexual fantasy, and those who communicate online for the purpose of arranging an in-person sexual contact (Alexy et al., 2006; McLaughlin, 2000, Taylor & Quayle, 2003; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). Extant research suggests that although child pornography Internet offenders may have fewer sex crimes in their histories than contact sex offenders, a sizeable portion of Internet offenders still do have some history of sex crimes (Seto & Eke, 2005; Webb et al., 2007). Available data further seem to suggest that these offenders may be socially isolated, have difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and suffer from problems related to affective dysregulation (Laulik et al., 2007; Middleton et al., 2006, Ward & Siegert, 2002). Though some evidence suggests that offense supportive cognitions may be relatively uncommon among Internet offenders (Malesky & Ennis, 2004; Middleton et al., 2006), some unique offense supportive beliefs have been observed in this population (Howitt & Sheldon, 2006; Malesky & Ennis, 2004). It is worth noting, however, that the nature and content of these distortions may be quite distinct from those of contact sex offenders, given that Internet sex offenders may not have had physical contact with their victims, may be more likely to view their relationship as romantic or egalitarian, and may have developed supportive networks of other offenders who condone this sort of behavior.

Directions for Future Research

Given that still relatively little research has examined this problem, more research is needed -- particularly more methodologically sophisticated studies that use appropriate control groups and employ at least moderate sample sizes. Though early research relied largely upon small samples of offenders, anecdotal reports, or other methodologically weak study designs, more methodologically rigorous studies have recently begun to emerge in the literature. Further studies that address the onset and progression of cybersex offending would have particular utility in developing our understanding of this population. Of benefit would be empirical studies that examine the characteristics, personality, and affective states of those with a history of Internet-based sexual crimes. This also could shed light on the etiological determinants or affective and personality correlates of offending. Moreover, future research might continue to address offense patterns of child pornography and other types of Internet offending through examination of criminal histories and future offending patterns. Indeed, because little is known about the re-offense risk of this population, follow-up studies that monitor the recidivism patterns of varied subtypes of Internet sex offenders would be especially beneficial.

Summary and Conclusions

With the increasing use and accessibility (e.g., through wireless mobile devices) of Internet technology, and the increased capacity of technological devices to store, transmit, and record digital photography or other data, the frequency with which Internet-based technology is involved in sexual crimes is likely to grow. Much of the current literature has attempted to draw out the typological distinctions among various groups, though much of this is based on theory or limited anecdotal evidence, rather than through careful empirical study. While systematic research has begun to examine the incidence and prevalence of this problem (e.g., Wolak et al., 2008) and some have compared the patterns of those who commit Internet-based offenses to

those who commit non-Internet based offenses (e.g., Elliot et al., 2009; Howitt & Sheldon, 2007; Webb et al., 2007), still much remains to be understood about this problem. For example, while some evidence suggests that those who engage in Internet-related offending have more limited offenses histories than non-Internet-based perpetrators, further research might help to clarify the role that Internet-based offenses play, if any, in the progression of offending. If there is a connection between Internet and contact offenses, it is doubtful that this is a unidirectional path, as evidence suggests that many Internet offenders already have a history of recorded sexual offenses.

Importantly, very little is understood about the primary prevention of Internet-based sex crimes. As the Internet continues to become more widely accessible and part of daily lives, prevention strategies deserve increased focus. Moreover, much remains to be known about management and treatment strategies for those already known to have committed an Internet-based offense. Given the heterogeneity of those who use the Internet in some manner to perpetrate sexual offenses, it is likely they differ in important ways with regard to the etiological determinants, motivations, and patterns of their behavior, thus suggesting that prevention, risk management, and treatment goals will necessarily differ from those of more traditional groups of sexual offenders. Finally, the detection and prosecution of Internet sex offenses pose considerable challenge for law enforcement, and require substantial international collaboration. Current issues facing the investigation and prosecution of such offenses include differing intra- and cross-national age of consent laws as well as non-uniform definitions of pornography. Though it is still unclear how these cross-jurisdictional issues might be resolved, it is certain that failure to address such issues will undoubtedly make it increasingly difficult to combat this complex issue.

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